

April 2001 ESA Listing Decisions on Copper Rockfish, Quillback Rockfish, Brown Rockfish & Pacific Herring

Today's Announcement: The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has determined that Endangered Species Act (ESA) listings are not warranted for Pacific herring, copper rockfish, quillback rockfish, and brown rockfish populations from Puget Sound, Washington. These ESA reviews were prompted by a February 1999 petition, and are the last of several determinations that address the ESA status of seven marine fish species in Puget Sound. Findings for three of the seven species (Pacific hake, Pacific cod and walleye pollock) were announced on Nov. 22, 2000, in the *Federal Register*. After reviewing available scientific and commercial information, the agency determined that the petitioned populations of rockfish and Pacific herring do not warrant protection under the ESA.

Agency Findings: While the petition requested ESA protection for Puget Sound populations of these four species, NMFS reviewed data across each species' range from California to Alaska. The results indicated the following "distinct population segments" (DPSs) under the ESA:

- ! Copper Rockfish - (1) a Puget Sound-proper DPS encompassing populations in waters east of Deception Pass and to the south and east of Admiralty Head; (2) a Northern Puget Sound DPS comprising populations in the San Juan Islands, Strait of Juan de Fuca, and the Canadian Gulf Islands to an uncertain degree further north into the rest of the Georgia Basin; and (3) a coastal DPS consisting of populations from California to Alaska with a provisional boundary at Cape Flattery with the Northern Puget Sound DPS (see Figure 1).

- ! Quillback Rockfish - (1) a Puget Sound-proper DPS; (2) a Northern Puget Sound DPS, and; (3) a coastal DPS. These DPS boundaries mirror those described above for copper rockfish (see Figure 2).

- ! Brown Rockfish - (1) a Puget Sound-proper DPS including populations in waters east of Deception Pass and to the south and east of Admiralty Head; and (2) a coastal DPS encompassing populations from California to Alaska, although the extent of the DPS is unknown (see Figure 3).

- ! Pacific Herring - The Pacific herring from Puget Sound and the Strait of Georgia constitute a "Georgia Basin Pacific herring DPS." The DPS' range includes marine waters of the Strait of Georgia, Puget Sound, and eastern Strait of Juan de Fuca (see Figure 4).

Next Step: This is a final determination and will not be re-considered unless NMFS accepts a future petition for these species, or the agency initiates a re-assessment based on new information.

Additional Information: Get more information on this and other ESA issues by visiting the NMFS Website at www.nwr.noaa.gov, or by contacting NMFS' Protected Resources Division, 525 NE Oregon St., Suite 500, Portland, OR, 97232; 503-230-5400.

Questions & Answers

Q: Who petitioned to have these species reviewed under the ESA?

A: On February 8, 1999, the Secretary of Commerce received a petition from Sam Wright of Olympia, Wash., to list and designate critical habitat for 18 species of marine fishes in Puget Sound, Wash., under the ESA. On June 21, 1999, the agency accepted the petition for seven of these species, including Pacific herring and three members of the family Sebastes: copper rockfish, quillback rockfish and brown rockfish.

Q: Why are these findings late relative to the ESA's "one year finding" requirement?

A: This is by far the largest number of species that the agency has dealt with in a single petition, so more time was needed to search the available information and confer with state and tribal co-managers on that scientific and commercial information.

Q: What steps are involved in the status review process?

A: To ensure a comprehensive review, NMFS requested comments from anyone having relevant information about the biology, life history, and management of the species. The agency also asked for quantitative evaluations of the quality and extent of the species' habitats and information on areas that may qualify as critical habitat. NMFS then convened a Biological Review Team that held technical meetings with co-managers and other interested parties, and reviewed the information in the context of making ESA listing determinations. These steps ensure that the process is both rigorous and based on the best available scientific and commercial information.

Q: Will NMFS conduct status reviews for the other petitioned rockfish species?

A: No. There was not enough available information to warrant reviews for 11 of the petitioned rockfish species. NMFS believes that the assessments for copper, quillback, and brown rockfish reflect current trends and risks for Puget Sound rockfish in general.

Q: Do any of these species qualify as candidate species?

A: No. Candidate species are those that have not yet been listed but face immediate, identifiable risks. However, more information is needed before they can be proposed for a listing determination. In this case, the agency had enough available information to make a well-documented, biologically sound determination for the three rockfish species and Pacific herring.

Q: What is a distinct population segment, or DPS?

A: A petitioned population must qualify as a "species" under the ESA to qualify for listing as a threatened or endangered species. The ESA defines a "species" to include distinct population segments,

or “DPSs.” On Feb. 7, 1996, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NMFS adopted a policy to clarify their DPS interpretation (see www.nwr.noaa.gov/1salmon/salmesa/fedreg/dpspolicy.pdf). The joint policy specifies key elements that must be considered when making DPS determinations, including: (1) the discreteness of the population segment in relation to the remainder of the species (or subspecies) to which it belongs; and (2) the significance of the population segment to the species or subspecies. While NMFS has developed a specific DPS policy for Pacific salmonids (and refers to DPSs of these species as “evolutionarily significant units”), the agency does not have a specific policy addressing other marine fishes, so it relies on principles in the joint agency policy.

Q: Did NMFS assess risk factors for these species?

A: NMFS considered a number of risk factors that, while not placing the species at risk of endangerment or extinction, do appear to have a strong influence on their abundance. Specific risk factors that bear close monitoring include harvest, habitat alteration/degradation (especially eelgrass elimination), ocean and climate changes, and predation by marine mammals.

Q: The Cherry Point herring population and several other populations have declined dramatically when compared to historic levels. How will these populations be protected from extinction if they are part of a larger DPS?

A: The declines apparent in several Puget Sound populations do not appear to be widespread throughout the range of the DPS. Because of the moderate to high productivity of Pacific herring populations and their tendency to stray among spawning sites, there are reasonable possibilities for reversing declines of depleted populations in specific spawning sites.

Q: What is the ESA status for the coastal rockfish DPSs?

A: NMFS focused on information and risk assessments pertaining to those rockfish DPSs encompassing the petitioned populations within Puget Sound. The coastal DPSs for rockfish were not evaluated as they were outside the scope of the petition.

Q: Does NMFS’ finding mean that these species are healthy in Puget Sound?

A: Not necessarily. Although NMFS does not believe that any of these species are threatened or endangered at this time, some local populations may require special management actions outside the context of the ESA. Available information suggests that populations of all four species are reduced relative to historical levels, and that these reductions may be related to a variety of human-induced impacts on the Puget Sound ecosystem.

Fisheries managers in the state of Washington recently classified a number of populations in Puget Sound as depressed or in critical condition, and harvest management schemes have been implemented to protect specific stocks. Such changes have included restrictions on harvest techniques, reductions in bag limits, and expanding the designation of marine protected areas. NMFS will continue to encourage

these and other conservation efforts in Puget Sound to ensure the long term health of these important marine resources.

Figure 1. Generalized DPS Boundaries for Copper Rockfish

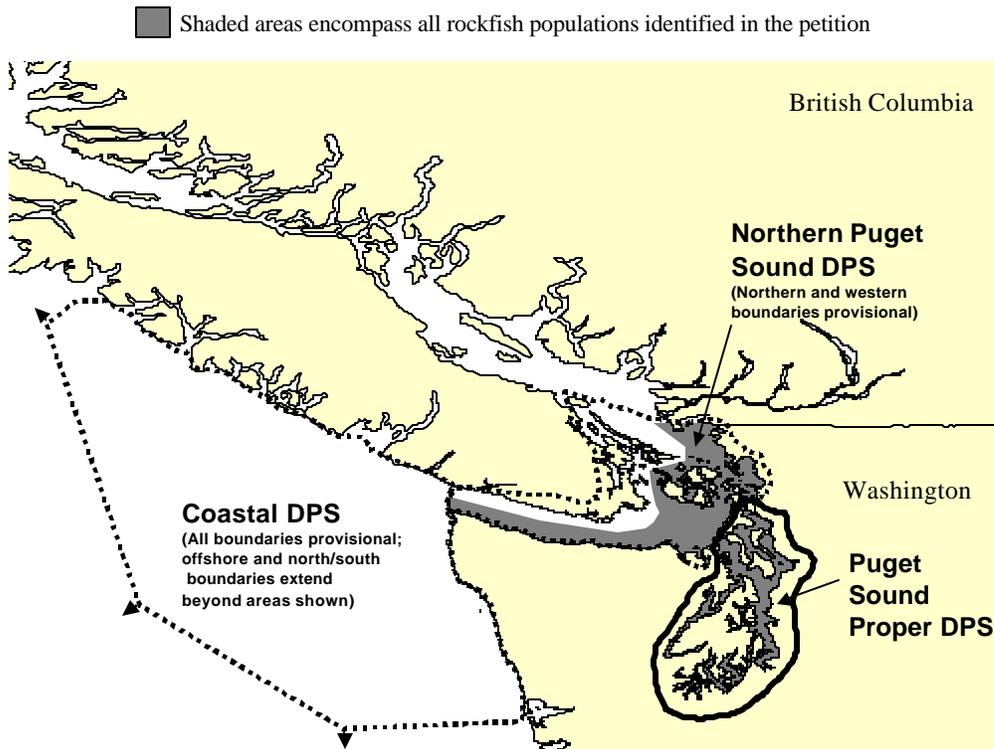


Figure 2. Generalized DPS Boundaries for Quillback Rockfish

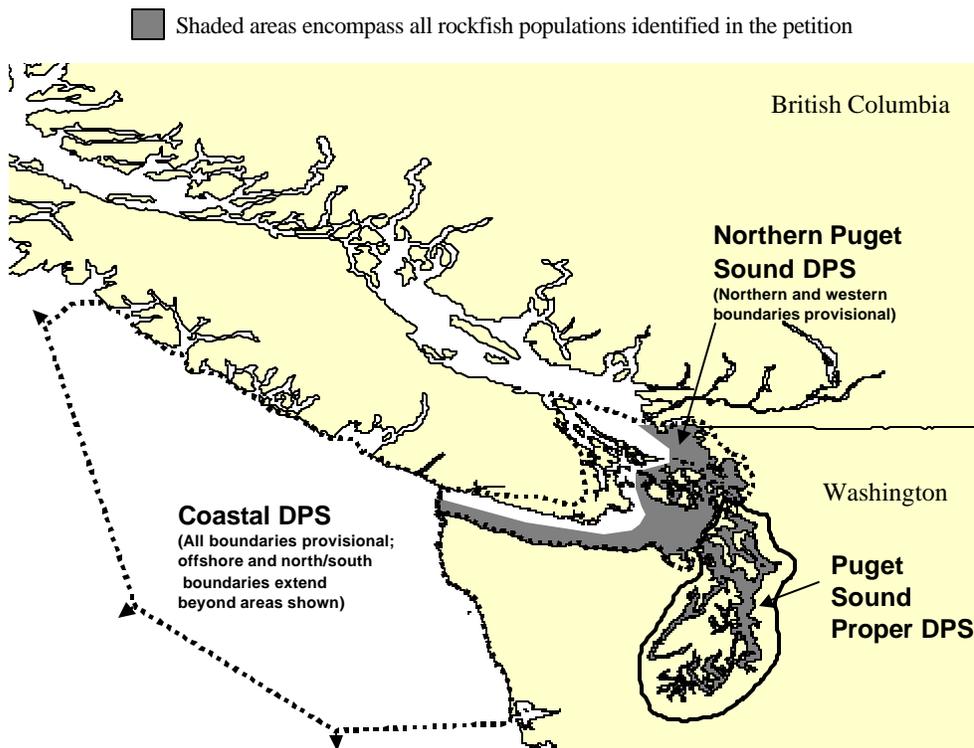


Figure 3. Generalized DPS Boundaries for Brown Rockfish

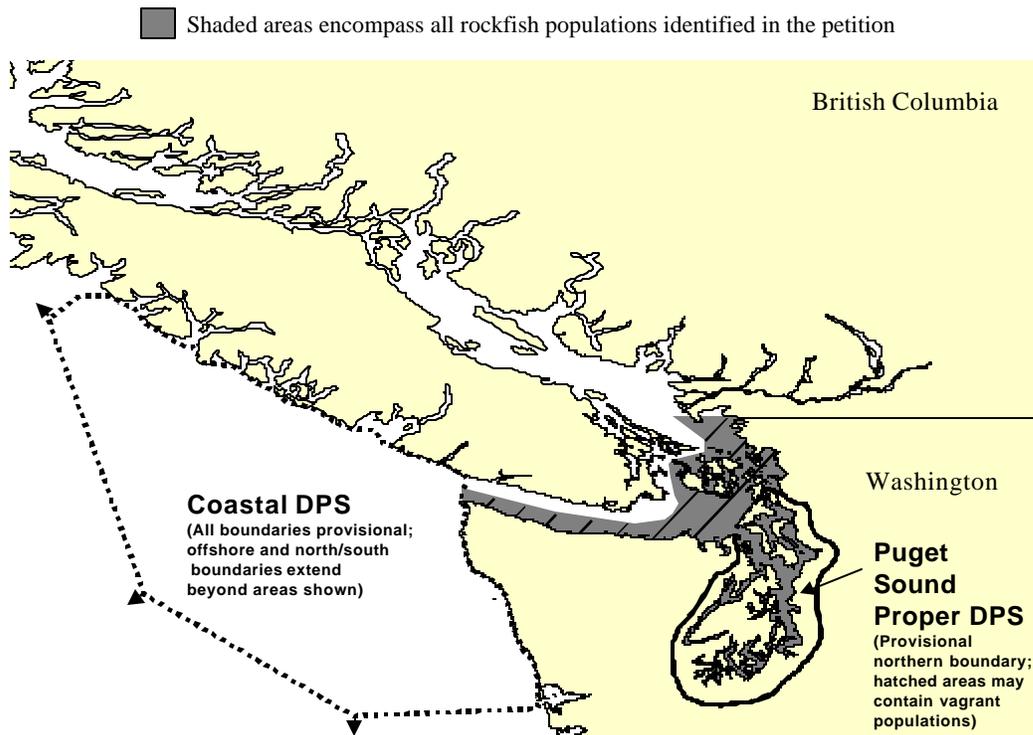


Figure 4. Generalized DPS Boundaries for Georgia Basin Pacific Herring Distinct Population Segment (DPS)

